

## Region 7 CAC Meeting Notes August 3, 2022

**CAC member attendance:** Bob Gilbert, Bob Hagedorn, Megan McKeighan, Andy Wright, George Luther, Ed Bukoskey, DeAnna Anderson, Dale Kreiman, Glenn Heitz, Liz McFarland

**FWP staff attendance:** Hope Stockwell, Ron Howell, Deb O'Neill, Hank Worsech, Dustin Temple, Brad Schmitz, Mike Backes, Todd Anderson, Jamie Hould, Erin O'Connor, Brett Dorak, Justin Feddes

**Guests:** Sally Hagedorn, Dee Gilbert

Regional Supervisor Brad Schmitz began the meeting by giving a brief overview of the agenda. This meeting will primarily focus on recreation and rec planning. The Director and Deputy director will be joining us, and we have some additional staff here from Helena as well. Later this evening, there will be a public open house with the Director, and everyone is welcome to attend. He then asked everyone to introduce themselves and include what their connection to the outdoors is.

Brad explained to guests how the variety of our CAC members is a bit unique. This area is primarily agriculture-based which explains much of our CAC members' interests compared to some other parts of the state where the compilation of CAC members is a bit more diverse. Focus may be evolving and changing in the future.

Next, Mike Backes, Region 7 Fisheries Manager briefly explained the current fish regulation process. The regs are being reviewed at this time. The Department is also rewriting the statewide fisheries management program and guide. There are public comment processes on both.

The fisheries regulation review process cycle used to be every four years but is now every two years. We've also discovered that statute says the regulations are supposed to be a two-year booklet. The regs next year will be a 2023-2024 version rather than a single year booklet. That is the first change that folks should be aware of.

Scoping for this process started in April and May; 89 comments were received statewide. Eight or nine of those have continued to move through the process and are in the proposal package. There are two proposals that affect Region 7. One was that anywhere there is a catch and release fishery, it has to be single hook and barbless. That would apply to our catch and release paddlefish days, which single hook and barbless doesn't work well for. Based on that context, Mike provided language to deny that proposal. The second proposed catch and release paddlefish angling for the entire Yellowstone River. We're probably going to be evolving that way once we get a good scope of how the new bypass at Intake affect that fishery. However, we're not quite ready to make that change just yet so that proposal was denied. There were a few comments on ice shelters as well, which are moving forward.

A public meeting was held in Glendive with only one person in attendance. Fisheries reviewed all the public comments provided in June. From there a package was put together and provided to Helena. It is now going through a review process to make sure there is consistent language, etc. That package will be released for public comment August 26<sup>th</sup> through September 22<sup>nd</sup>. The regs will be finalized at the October Commission meeting.

The Fisheries division proposed 42 changes that are currently moving forward in draft form. In Region 7, Mike proposed to prohibit paddlefish angling in the new Intake bypass channel. That is a

Bureau of Reclamation-owned facility and was intended for passage of pallid sturgeon. Of course, other fish also use it. Pallid sturgeon use that bypass the same time that paddlefish season is occurring, so the BOR was nervous about incidental catches of those pallids. In Region 6, our yellow paddlefish tag is valid from in the Missouri River from the North Dakota line to Fort Peck Reservoir. Region 6 proposed seven days of harvest fishing for paddlefish in that stretch of river. There would be no catch and release.

Language involving spearing was tweaked as well to clarify spearing while scuba diving or snorkeling and spearing through the ice. There was also a request to change the dead bait regulation to be able to use cisco out of Fort Peck.

The statewide Fisheries management program and guide was just redone in 2018. It was intended to be a 10-year plan and good until 2027; however, things change rapidly anymore. The new idea is that the plan will now be updated every four years and it will be an electronic document. July 15 was the deadline for any regional edits. The draft version should be out in mid-November. Then it will be out for public comment in December and most likely will be approved by the Commission in April 2023.

Next, Brad discussed recreation management and planning. Since the start of the pandemic, there has been an increase in demand and desire for outdoor recreation. This has precipitated further discussion on the subject. This part of the state has not been an exception, although we seem to be more so in demand for hunting and fishing, mostly hunting. Our Mission Statement says that we provide for the fish, wildlife, parks and recreation resources of the state of Montana. How do we management recreational resources? Many things are considering 'recreation'. Our leadership group has brainstormed how we handle this and how we can be proactive versus reactive.

Brian Burky, Regional Parks and Outdoor Recreation Manager, has a presentation on this topic but is out sick today so Brad will give that for him. What is changing? How can FWP be responsive? What are the desired outdoor recreation changes in the region?

Outdoor recreation can address social and scientific challenges with an eye towards providing access and protecting resources. Recreation management has become increasingly important. To start the process, we need to gather and analyze data. Managers contribute on the ground perspective. As recreational demands have increased, we've began to include not just people like park managers but also biologists, archaeologists, etc. We collect as much data as we can – both social and biological data. Then we need to gather public input.

Since 2010, there has been a 71% increase in use at our sites. During that same time period, Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks only increased about 30-40%.

Region 7 has five State Parks, 21 Fishing Access Sites, five Wildlife Management Areas, 250 Block Management Areas, 17 boat ramps, 65 latrines and 350 camp sites.

We now have a Lower Yellowstone River guide. This booklet is a new river guide to help educate the public about floating the lower Yellowstone and recreating responsibly and safely. There was a committee that has worked together over the last year and a half to come up with ideas for what is desired on the lower Yellowstone River. A few more access sites, more camping opportunities, economic development and a handful of other ideas were suggested from that. Some folks did say that they didn't want more opportunities.

Next, Hope Stockwell, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division Administrator, discussed how we got here and the holistic approach to it. Director Worsech gave some background on the recent Parks and Outdoor Rec division re-org. This effectively put wildlife management areas, fishing access sites and other recreation areas all under one division. This has proven to be a good opportunity to bring staff expertise and knowledge together. We need to effectively take care of and manage the property that we have. Hope added that our mission is to provide stewardship of the resources for future generations and that was a factor as well. The re-org will help us focus on efficiency and consistency. What's under the Park and Outdoor Recreation is state parks, management of fishing access sites, river recreation management, management of recreation on Wildlife Management Areas but not the habitat which stayed with the Wildlife folks, maintenance on all of the above, but with consultation with all the other managers so we're not losing habitat components. The other things are all the private land hunting and fishing access programs. We also have a new shooting range development program and the existing shoot range grant program, as well as a trails grant program.

Brad posed the question to the group of how do we manage recreation opportunities, however those look, and still retain, preserve or share our wonderful resources? What should recreation look like in southeast Montana? How do we get there? Are there strategies or things you're concerned about or looking forward to?

Megan feels strongly about educational outreach. Small things make a difference like the Leave No Trace principles. Something like that is very applicable to the Lower Yellowstone River sites. How do you get continuity of educational outreach? Is that something that should happen in workshops or places like Hunter Ed courses? Try to incorporate more of what it means to be an outdoor steward into different things. Opportunities for people to learn how to recreate responsibly are essential. Educate the public who are coming here on Region 7, what is specific to us and how they can help manage the places we have here. Create stewards.

Dale's perspective is specific to Block Management. He gets calls from shed hunters, coyote callers and other non-hunting recreationists. Many of those folks think activities like that are covered under Block Management, which they're not. Recreation is a broad term. He suggests taking into consideration landowners who allow access for other types of nontraditional recreation. We need to diversify private land opportunities, not just public land opportunities.

Glenn asked if there is a program that covers landowners who may have a recreationist have some sort of accident on their property. Hope replied that there is a general recreation statute that covers landowners who provide free public hunting opportunities from liability.

Ed discussed funding. It's hard to compete with people who can charge a large amount for outfitting or trespass fees. The reimbursement rate cap for BMA's was recently raised but needs to keep going up. Dustin noted that the Department is seeking an increase in Block Management payments. Hope added that current cap is \$25,000. Ed feels that the PALA program is big money going out in different areas and has some limited opportunities for antelope and deer.

George was part of a study with some attorneys a few years ago where they discussed liability and if a certain landowner was protected enough to participate in Block Management. The attorney's opinion was that they were protected enough except in a few areas. There's a lot of programs offered by the Department, and it can get confusing, which is a deterrent to some landowners. Does anyone review City/County growth policies? The growth policy for Miles City identifies about eight miles of

potential trails outside of Miles City. Growth policies typically have a recreation component. Interested parties can go online for most counties and pick up their growth policies. Miles City and Custer County are in the process of updating theirs. Counties have to update their policies every five or six years. He is a county representative on the city/county planning board. The Lower Yellowstone River (LYSR) guide is a good start. Try to minimize conflicts with private landowners as those will kill any potential future plans. He encourages the Department to try to minimize liability risks moving forward with LYSR plans and has had a conversation with Captain Anderson about how enforcement will be provided on additional sites. Conservation Easements already have a recreational use component; do you expand that program to allow not just hunter use days but maybe something like recreational use days? That may be appealing to some folks who would rather deal with recreational use than hunter use.

Megan being able to have real-time communication of such things like water levels, campsite and boat ramp statuses would be nice. A way to have that kind of information present could be important to future opportunities.

Liz appreciates the comments already presented but especially the education piece and how to recreate responsibly. Southeastern Montana is unique; we need to recognize the culture and values that are here. We have lots of archaeology and paleontology opportunities that are of high value. Don't try to mimic what is going on further west. Our ag base and sparse population are two of the things that make us unique. Recognize that improvements will make people come and that will require some balance. Leave infrastructure building to private interests.

Dale said things change rapidly. Looking at the last two years, how many of us expected the changes we're seeing in the world today? Do we have an idea of the potential for change? Hope replied that we're currently working on the mid-year visitation data for state parks. We're a bit below last year but still about 14% above 2019. We're trying to figure out what the new normal is ourselves. Thinking about how we develop a recreation system, we have to keep in mind is what people desire and what we're able to provide. We're stewarding the resource, but we need to facilitate the use. We're thinking about lots of things like how we determine fees and make those a bit more consistent, staffing, expectations, shift in use, etc.

DeAnna noted that the more you build the more they will come. That said, we have to be careful, and education is key.

Bob H. said he tends to look at most things from an agriculturist viewpoint. Every time the CAC has gone on a tour somewhere, he has noticed weeds. That's a downer. Is that a funding thing or why is it like that? Brad noted that we work with our county weed folks who take care of many of our sites. Jamie works closely with many of them, and we have a weed management plan in place. Some of the counties are good and others aren't doing so well. Mike added that some of that is a timing issue as well – high water events cause a disturbance and riverbeds end up with a whole new weed bed afterwards. Hope also added that they are looking to combine contracts and make weed spraying more efficient, as well as looking at new technology.

Andrew pointed out that he lives in a desolate area - there are no FAS's in his neck of the world. There is Medicine Rocks State Park. There is a lot of paleontology stuff in his country, but the number one recreation activity is still hunting. Because of that biology is ever important.

Brad noted that we're at the beginning of recreation in Region 7 in a lot of aspects. We've dealt with rec management in the way of hunting forever, and we're good at it. However, some other types of rec are new and are coming at us. We're taking steps to get prepared for that. He encouraged the

group to brainstorm and tell us what they see coming. Dustin added that the LYSR project is a pilot project, a toe in the water if you will. He appreciates everyone's comments. Helena will not decide what goes on out here in terms of recreation.

#### Roundtable Discussion:

Dale: He hears from license providers that the \$5 replacement fee is unpopular. He talks to a lot of different Block Management cooperators. People are complaining about elk numbers but they're all on private ground where they're not accessible. Weeds are here for forever.

DeAnna: A lot of her clients have complained about the paper tags. The new E-tags are somewhat scary. The archery antelope draw this year was hard for them. Its hard to explain to clients while they're not getting drawn. Brad noted that the 900-series archery antelope are a set quota of 6500 and there's also been a marked increase in applicants. Hank also pointed out that nonresidents only get 10% of that number and the demand for archery has gone up. She would like to see the ability to edit drawing application submittals up until the deadline. Being told that you're out of luck after you realize you made a mistake on your application, and caught it in time to fix it, is disappointing.

Liz: What is any timeline or next steps in regard to rec planning? Brad replied that we're already working on the LYSR. We have a relatively new Parks and Rec manager but he is not new to the business. On a local basis we're looking at lots of things. There are some things that we're missing out here like camping. How do we find new spots and better utilize existing spots? Where do we go with our WMA's? Those things are more immediate. Brad is also looking to Hope to help lead the charge.

Ed B: How many people have heard of Harvest Host? Harvest Host allows people to come in and camp on properties who are signed up to participate. They're out of California. There's no liability to the landowner. Camping is free. The only thing they request is something that visitors will enjoy and spend money locally. He feels Harvest Host could put KOA out of business. It's been a good year for agate picking.

Bob H: Thankfully, we have had a good year production-wise. Wildlife will benefit from that a lot. However, that also brings the problem of fire danger for the next few months. He hopes we stress to hunters and others to be careful out there and take caution to not start any fires.

George: He has also heard that folks are starting to worry about fire danger, especially since coal seams are starting to flare. He appreciates and enjoys working with the FWP staff. The Intake bypass is going to upend things on this end of the Yellowstone. He's talked to people catching paddlefish clear down by the Tongue River. He'd be curious to see our tagged and radioed fish data down the road. For general knowledge, there are at least two other big mega-energy projects being worked on right now.

Andy: He has heard that people are worried about deer populations in his area. (George noted that he's heard the opposite.) Elk populations seem to be good, though.

Megan: regarding outreach, we shouldn't forget about our public and current youth. We've talked about all the people that could come to eastern Montana but there's a huge piece to getting the kids

that already live here outdoors and learning. Engage the kids that are already here. How can locals use local infrastructure and get involved?

Bob G: He's thinking about public policy. We talk about build, build, build. What if people don't want to come when we build? He thinks the lower Yellowstone idea is a good idea. However, we don't know if people are going to use new access. Start small and build up. Don't get ahead of the curve. We're better off to be a bit more reactive. Don't force things on communities that they don't want. He likes the conversation and the ideas that are going on, but you have to temper things with moderation. This group and the Department is doing a great job.

Glenn: Is there any definite plans on the Powder River? Brad responded that there isn't at this time as we don't have a finalized agreement on the proposed property. We're still working through the appraisal and some other steps in that process. Glenn noted that they are not seeing travelers to his neck of the woods like they did the last two years.

Brad concluded by expressing his appreciation for everyone's involvement and dedication to get to these meetings. Anyone who wants is more than welcome to attend the Director's Open House at 6:00. Hope expressed her appreciation for everyone's time today as well.